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Thirukkurungudi and Charode: Tracing Sculptural and Inscriptional Vestiges of Erstwhile Travancore

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Abstract: Temple architecture of high standard developed in almost all regions during ancient India. The temple and its structural specificities are the embodiments of the popular culture of the civilization. The complexity and the divergence of myriad temple structures conceal certain structural facets which encompasses stunning and less adored pieces of worship and creativity. Several such structural, iconographic and epigraphical representations that stands overlooked among the mighty columns of the temples at Thirukkurungudi and Charode of erstwhile Travancore are prone to appraisal here. The study also traces the Kerala connection of these temples as gleaned from inscriptions and sculptures within it. The political affiliation of these temples, the impact of maritime relations, cultural and religious interaction and popular history find focus here. The representation of subalterns within the temple calls forth a reading on early society. An extensive historical and archaeological research of the vast canvas of sculptures and conservation of these fading relics of ancient heritage is also stressed.

Keywords: Thirukkurungudi, Epigraphy, Bell Inscription, Aditya Varma, Chitra Gopuram, Aana Shasta, Charode

Introduction

The temple is one of the most significant monuments of Indian architecture as it sums up and represents the subtle values of Indian culture. Elaborations of the temple structure followed the firm establishment of image worship and the accompanying development of the ritual, which took time to crystallize. Temples come in many styles, are situated in diverse locations, deploy different construction methods and are adapted to different deities and regional beliefs, yet almost all of them share certain core ideas, symbolism and themes. The southern temples are extraordinary architectural feats, but they were built to serve as the spiritual link between the gods and humans. Inside the temples people had the ability to draw closer to the gods through the use of rituals and ceremonies. Religious symbols are found throughout the Hindu temple architecture,

which reinforce the spiritual link. Many ideas from the epics and the Puranas, along with symbolically representing the religion's ultimate goal of *moksa*, are seen in the temples.

The paper presents a comprehensive picture of the unnoticed aspects, both sculptures and inscriptions of certain important and once mighty south Indian temples, explaining the niceties of their architecture, the many subtle variations in style and sample of certain rare figurines, that call forth scholarly attention and preservation. The unique panels within the temple of Thirukkurungudi reveal a faded connection with the Kerala temples, which is obviously attested by the authority of Travancore kings in the Tamil region. Similarly the influence of Arab maritime relations and its inherent aspects reveal the nature of commerce and religious toleration prevailed in the region. The depiction of hunter community calls forth a deliberation on society and tradition. The Charode temple preserves in itself an episode of a mysterious artistic inventiveness and popular history. The deliberations upon of each of the features are delineated alongside the narrative for the sake of maintaining continuity.



Figure 1: The Azhagiya Nambi Rayar Temple, Thirukkurungudi

The Azhagiya Nambi Rayar Temple, Thirukkurungudi

Besides the Nambi river and against the backdrop of the Western Ghats (Mahendragiri) on the southern Tamil Nadu-Kerala border is situated the Azhagiya Nambi Rayar temple at Thirukkurungudi. The temple is one among the 108 Vaishnava shrines or abodes of Vishnu. As per the Vaishnava tradition, Thirukkurungudi is said to be the 'Southern Home' of Lord Vishnu and is also called 'Dakshina badri'. Thirukkurungudi is a holy Divyadesa complex of five temples and five Nambis ('Nambu' in Tamil means believe and 'Nambi' means believed by all or the Lord. The deity is venerably called 'Nambi'). The main temple of Thirukkurungudi has three Nambis in *Nindra* (standing), *Irundha* (sitting) and *Kidantha* (reclining) postures. Thirukkurungudi is also known as 'Kuranga Kshetram', Kuranga being the name of Bhumi Devi (Earth) who performed penance for the Lord in this holy place (Figure 1).